The Farnham Society

Air Quality Committee

Report to Annual General Meeting 2021.

Introduction

As noted in last year's report to the AGM, the impact of the Covid 19 restrictions during 2020 had a very substantial impact on traffic volumes both nationally and locally which resulted in much lower pollution from Nitrogen Dioxide (NO_2) concentrations. This was true in Farnham as it was elsewhere.

This report gives some details about this but concentrates more on what has happened since the restrictions were lifted.

Air Quality data for 2020

As many of you will know, WBC uses a system of diffusion tubes to monitor Nitrogen Dioxide concentrations (the main type of air pollution in Farnham) and there are some 24 sites in and around the town. This cheap and simple system is backed up by the sophisticated automatic monitoring equipment which during 2020 was located at the Royal Deer Crossroads and which continuously measures both NO_2 and Particulate Matter PM $_{10}$. All of these data are available to us through the WBC website where the monthly diffusion tube data are posted and on the Ricardo website www.airqualityengland.co.uk where the automatic monitor real-time data are streamed.

The WBC 2021 Air Quality Annual Status Report, covering the 2020 calendar year, was published in August 2021. It is available to view on the WBC website. The report shows that for the first time since 2005 when Farnham's Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) was designated, there were no breaches of UK government objectives in air pollution. This is obviously very good news.

2020 was however an unusual year for air pollution because of Covid restrictions. Average annual NO_2 concentrations (the main pollutant of concern in Farnham) were some 20% to

30 % below 2019 levels. Particulate Matter PM_{10} concentrations on the other hand showed

effectively, no change, indicating that traffic is not the main contributor to this pollutant in Farnham.

The Picture for 2021 so far

Traffic volumes nationally and locally are pretty much back to pre-pandemic levels although there has perhaps been a slight lessening of total flows through central Farnham because of the lane restrictions.

It was of course possible that NO_2 pollution would return to its 2019 concentrations. This

however has not happened in central Farnham so far although concentrations on Station Hill and Upper Hale Road are again close to the 2019 levels.

Why are we not seeing a return of high pollution levels in the town? The reasons relate in some degree to the rapidly changing mix of vehicle engine types on our roads. The national figures now show that sales of diesel-powered cars have fallen to 10% compared with 50% only four years ago and plug-in electric vehicles now make up 20% of sales compared with 2% in 2017. Of course, those figures will take time to feed through to a full effect on the total stock of vehicles on our roads, but we are starting to see the impact.

Added to this is the effect in central Farnham of the lane restrictions which of course have been keenly debated. Providing space between traffic and pedestrians does undoubtedly

provide lower concentrations of NO_2 and reversing that process as with the more recent

return to two traffic lanes in The Borough leads to higher levels of pollution.

The Future

Farnham now has a real opportunity to break free from the significant health hazard of air pollution in the town. At present, the trends look good but that does not mean that air pollution is no longer a problem. The solutions are clear but are we all prepared to accept the changes required in the use of our cars and in our behaviour? Let's hope so.

John Slater

The Farnham Society

22/10/21